



Enhancement of Life after COVID-19 by the Application of Sustainable Development Principles: A Human Rights Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper aimed to argue the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to highlight how the global community grappled with the realities of life during and after the pandemic and how it accelerated the socioeconomic trajectories locally and abroad. Despite these formidable challenges, the acceleration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and robust digital infrastructure to effect positive change cannot be underestimated. This paper therefore examined how human life can be enriched in a post-COVID world by applying sustainable development principles, specifically focusing on a human rights perspective. It explored the intricate relationships between technology, social justice, and economic growth, providing insights into how societies can navigate the complexities of the current landscape and work toward building a more equitable future for all, enhancing life after COVID-19 through intentional and inclusive policies. The methodology approach used was a qualitative pedagogy, which included, among other things, investigating literature from esteemed scholars, judicial precedents, Legal, and all other relevant reports locally and abroad. The study found that COVID-19 disrupted livelihoods. The authors recommend that authorities align policies to align recovery mechanisms post-COVID-19 with those of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to address issues such as monitoring the efficacy of these strategies and promoting resilience. The authors hope the paper will add to advancing human life discourses after COVID-19 through the intensification of ICT.

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INTRODUCTION

The global community faced the most difficult and life-changing phenomenon in 2019 when COVID-19 surfaced and ripped humanity apart. The deadly virus first appeared in Wuhan, China, before it spread worldwide. Covid 19 significantly transfigured prominent aspects of human life, making it necessary to comprehensively examine its impact on social, economic, and cultural dimensions.¹ The intensification of Information Communication Technology was fast-forwarded by the pandemic, which brought

¹ World Health Organization, "Global Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights and Development," *WHO Technical Report Series*, 2023.

inevitable commendable ramifications to socio-economic imperatives. Nkuna opines that the pandemic broadened socioeconomic disparities and calls for sustainable solutions.² The state must closely align its policies to protect the vulnerable in the information technology era, balancing access to information and providing sustainable solutions to the less privileged. The pandemic has further disrupted proper functioning in the schooling system, a dimension of temporary closure of academic institutions, and the impediment of face-to-face classes.³ Although this has brought changes in the academic enterprise in the sector, it suddenly evolved teaching delivery to a more sophisticated and diverse system that integrates technology into teaching and learning instead of traditional education. This global crisis has highlighted the critical importance of sustainable development principles in rebuilding resilient societies while protecting fundamental human rights.⁴ The devastation pandemic heightened, pushing the frontiers of poverty to the extremes. Essentially, the negative changes in humans aggravated and inflicted more thorns of inequalities and vulnerabilities among marginalized communities, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable solutions.

In its founding provisions, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights are a core focus in addressing devastations challenging human life in agreement with the international frameworks established to relieve the populations. This urgency underscores the need for immediate action and the importance of the topic, instilling a sense of responsibility and urgency in the audience.⁵ These principles are not just essential, but they are the key to promoting equitable recovery and ensuring the protection of human rights for all individuals. The state must play a pivotal role in providing potential solutions to our challenges, which is significant and reassuring, instilling a sense of hope and confidence in the audience.⁶ As the world navigates the aftermath of this global crisis, it is crucial to explore ways sustainable development principles⁷ can be applied to enhance the quality of life for all individuals, focusing on upholding human rights. This exploration is a theoretical exercise and a practical roadmap for a more just and peaceful society.⁸ Nkuna asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly among marginalized communities.⁹ In this regard, applying sustainable development principles, as enshrined in the South African Constitution, is paramount. These principles can serve as a framework to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic and promote life enhancement for all individuals.¹⁰ Furthermore, they can facilitate the enhancement of life for all individuals. By adhering to these guidelines, societies can navigate current adversities while promoting an environment that encourages well-being and progression for everyone involved.

The paper examines the multifaceted challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on socioeconomic trajectories. It underscores the significance of the ICT post-pandemic period. The paper advocates for aligning policies with sustainable principles prescribed by the international authorities to protect vulnerable persons. The paper delves into discussing the implications of the pandemic in more diverse discourses, such as the significance and possibility of Information and ICT in magnifying human life after COVID-19, addressing the Human Rights implications of ICT in the aftermath of COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19, the nexus between COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence, applying sustainable development principles to address Gender-Based Violence, Human Dignity in the post-pandemic era, the concept of Human Dignity in the South African context, The Fourth Industrial Revolution and its impact on Human Dignity, The intersection of cultural norms and sustainable development principles in Post-COVID-19 recovery efforts.

² N. Nkuna, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Marginalized Communities in South Africa," *Journal of Human Rights* 15, no.2(2021):143–56.

³ Andrianarivo Andriandafiarisoa Ralison Ny Avotra et al., "Conceptualizing the State of the Art of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Green Construction and Its Nexus to Sustainable Development," *Frontiers in Environmental Science* 9 (2021): 774822.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, "Sustainable Development in the Post-COVID Era: A Human Rights-Based Approach," *UNDP Policy Brief*, 2022.

⁵ South African Constitution, "Bill of Rights - Chapter Two," Retrieved November 12 (1996): 2013.

⁶ National Planning Commission, "National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make It Work," 2012.

⁷ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁸ Juliet Eileen Joseph, "The South African Development Community (SADC) and Covid-19: Revisiting Security Community in SADC," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities*, no. 5 (September 30, 2021): 69–81, <https://doi.org/10.21303/2504-5571.2021.002047>.

⁹ Nkuna, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Marginalized Communities in South Africa."

¹⁰ Criminal Law Amendment Act et al., "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996," *Constitution 1997* (1997): 4.

METHODOLOGY

This study surveyed the relationship between sustainable development principles and human rights in a post-pandemic world, focusing on the devastation and the unexpected changes fast-forwarded by COVID-19. The approach used was a qualitative pedagogy, which included, among other things, investigating literature from esteemed scholars, judicial precedents, Legal, and all other relevant reports locally and abroad. The research underscored the necessity of addressing human rights violations and advocating for sustainable practices. By integrating both primary and secondary sources, the study augmented the depth and rigor of the discourse, thereby contributing to the pursuit of a more equitable recovery.

The Significance and Possibility of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Magnifying Human Life after COVID-19

The COVID-19 devastation undoubtedly immensely transfigured humanity's way of life, working and interacting with one another to the greater society. To the same degree, societies adapted to the changes brought about by this global crisis, and ICT has appeared as a critical factor in amplifying post-pandemic lives. From enabling remote work and online education to facilitating telehealth services and connecting individuals through social media, ICT has proven to be a vital lifeline during these challenging times. As humanity begins to envision a future beyond the pandemic, the potential of ICT stands at the forefront of innovation, offering new avenues for improving public health, fostering economic resilience, and enhancing overall well-being. This exploration of the role of ICT aims to highlight its transformative power and the opportunities that lie ahead in reshaping people's daily lives, facilitating connections, and building a more sustainable and inclusive world post-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformation across various sectors, fundamentally changing how society operates and interacts.¹¹ This rapid digitalization has brought opportunities and challenges in ensuring human rights protection while leveraging technology for societal advancement.¹² For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption and reliance on ICT across various spheres of life, including education, healthcare, and social interactions. Additionally, the increased use of ICT during the pandemic has highlighted both the potential and challenges of these technologies in ensuring the realization of human rights.¹³

The pandemic has demonstrated ICT's crucial role in maintaining societal functions through remote work, online education, and digital healthcare services.¹⁴ The South African Government's Digital Economy Masterplan 2023, which emphasizes the transformative potential of ICT in improving citizens' quality of life while promoting inclusive growth, is a critical player in this transformation.¹⁵ Research indicates that strategically integrating sustainable development principles with digital transformation initiatives can significantly enhance social equality and economic opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role of ICT in facilitating remote work, online education, telemedicine, and virtual social connections. According to the South African Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, the increased reliance on ICT during the pandemic can improve accessibility, efficiency, and inclusivity in various sectors, thereby enhancing the quality of life for South African citizens. Ndlovu and Makhubela argue that integrating sustainable development principles, such as promoting digital literacy and bridging the digital divide, can further amplify the positive impact of ICT in the post-COVID-19 era, fostering a sense of optimism about the future in the audience.¹⁶

¹¹ K. Masondo and P. Shabangu, "Digital Transformation in Post-COVID South Africa: Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of Information Technology in Africa* 15, no. 3 (2022): 78–95.

¹² South African Human Rights Commission, "Digital Rights and Privacy Protection in the Post-Pandemic Era," *Annual Report*, 2023.

¹³ T. Masondo and K. Shabangu, "The Role of ICT in Promoting Human Rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *South African Journal of Information and Communication Technology* 12, no. 1 (2021): 23–34.

¹⁴ Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, "South African Digital Economy Masterplan 2023-2028," 2023.

¹⁵ M., & Makhubela, S. Ndlovu, "'ICT Integration in Sustainable Development: Post-COVID Perspectives,'" *African Journal of Science, Technology, and Innovation*, 12, no. 1 (2024): 15-32.

¹⁶ S. Ndlovu and L. Makhubela, "Bridging the Digital Divide in the Post-COVID-19 Era: A Sustainable Development Approach," *International Journal of Digital Equity* 1, no. 1 (2022): 45-57.

Addressing the Human Rights Implications of ICT in the Aftermath of COVID-19

While ICT adoption has brought numerous benefits, it has also raised significant concerns regarding privacy rights and digital inclusion.¹⁷ Implementing the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) in 2020 has become increasingly relevant in safeguarding individual privacy rights in the digital age.¹⁸ The digital divide, a term that describes the gap between those with access to digital technologies and those without, continues to pose significant challenges, particularly affecting marginalized communities' access to essential services and opportunities.¹⁹ According to the South African Human Rights Commission, using ICT, particularly in contact tracing and remote surveillance, can infringe on the right to privacy and data protection as enshrined in the Constitution.²⁰ There needs to be more concluding evidence among epidemiologists and public health specialists about how school closures reduce the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, the digital divide, which disproportionately affects marginalized communities, poses a significant threat to the realization of the right to access information and communication, as well as the right to education and healthcare.²¹ In this regard, applying sustainable development principles, such as promoting digital inclusion and protecting personal data, can help mitigate the human rights challenges associated with the increased use of ICT in the post-COVID-19 era. Furthermore, Mthethwa and Khumalo have emphasized the importance of developing robust legal and regulatory frameworks to safeguard individual rights and ensure ICT's responsible and ethical use in sustainable development.²²

Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19

2020 witnessed an upsurge of the deadly Coronavirus (generally referred to as COVID-19), which seems to be posing a serious challenge to traditional human co-existence.²³ As the measures needed to contain the virus are unorthodox,²⁴ its adverse effect has been felt in almost all aspects of life, including adults and children. Countries' responses to mitigate the spread of the disease and reduce its impact, which in most cases have included the imposition of curfew-like regulations and restrictions on social and economic activities,²⁵ have sometimes made the situation worse or enabled another troubling, harmful social vice. South Africa seems to be a good example. While the government's response against COVID-19 (imposition of national lockdown) may have helped mitigate the spread of the disease and reduce its effects,²⁶ it seems to have enabled an unwelcome surge in other social vices, such as gender-based violence (GBV), especially in rural areas and informal settlements.²⁷ This alarming rise in GBV incidents has been particularly pronounced in rural areas and informal settlements, where the challenges of isolation and economic hardship have intensified the vulnerabilities faced by many individuals, especially women. Thus, while the lockdown measures may have played a crucial role in bending the curve of COVID-19 infections, the ensuing social dynamics reveal a complex interplay of factors that require urgent attention. The dual crises of pandemic response and spiking social vices serve as a reminder of the multifaceted challenges faced by societies, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive strategies

¹⁷ "Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA)," Government Gazette § (2020).

¹⁸ South African Police Service, "Annual Crime Statistics Report 2022-2023: Focus on Gender-Based Violence," 2023.

¹⁹ Digital Council Africa, "State of Digital Inclusion in South Africa: Post-COVID Analysis," 2024.

²⁰ South African Human Rights Commission, *The SAHRC. Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights in South Africa* (Pretoria: SAHRC, 2021).

²¹ Luis Miguel Lázaro Lorente, Ana Ancheta Arrabal, and Cristina Pulido-Montes, "The Right to Education and ICT during COVID-19: An International Perspective," *Sustainability* 12, no. 21 (October 31, 2020): 9091, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12219091>.

²² Mthethwa, N., & Khumalo, B. 2022. Sustainable development and the protection of human rights in the digital age. *South African Law Journal*, 139(2), 234-259.

²³ N. Mthethwa, "Sustainable Development and the Protection of Human Dignity in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (2021): 123-13.

²⁴ Ishmael Obaeko Iwara et al., "COVID-19 Lock-down Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Households in Rural Areas: A Perspective from Vhembe District, South Africa," *Sociološki Pregled* 54, no. 3 (2020): 761-98.

²⁵ Ekene Amaechi et al., "Appraising the Local Village Leaders' response to the Challenges Faced by Rural Households during the Corona Virus 2019 National Lock-down in South Africa," *Sociološki Pregled* 55, no. 4 (2021): 1233-63.

²⁶ Kingsley Ekene Amaechi, Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane, and Raymond Rasalokwane, "Feminist Reflections on the Impact of the South African National COVID-19 Lockdown on the Upsurge of Gender Based Violence in Mahwelereng Township of Limpopo Province, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 19, no. 1 (2021): 17186-203.

²⁷ Beth M. Rauhaus, Deborah Sibila, and Andrew F Johnson, "Addressing the Increase of Domestic Violence and Abuse during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Need for Empathy, Care, and Social Equity in Collaborative Planning and Responses," *The American Review of Public Administration* 50, no. 6-7 (2020): 668-74.

that address both public health and social welfare in tandem. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the longstanding issue of GBV in South Africa, with reports of increased incidences of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and femicide during the lockdown periods.

According to the South African Police Service, the number of GBV-related crimes increased by 70% during the first year of the pandemic.²⁸ The scholars delve into the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and gender-based violence, offering a detailed analysis of the factors that led to a surge in violence against marginalized groups, particularly women, as lockdown measures and social isolation became prevalent. Their exploration underscores how economic stressors, heightened household tensions, and the societal impacts of a public health emergency create a conducive environment for domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.²⁹

Furthermore, they propose that the principles of sustainable development can be essential in addressing this urgent issue. By promoting gender equality, ensuring access to resources, and fostering inclusive policies, the application of sustainable development frameworks can provide practical strategies to combat and mitigate the impacts of gender-based violence exacerbated by the pandemic.³⁰

The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted societal structures, revealing a troubling increase in GBV. Chagama argues that the relationship between COVID-19 and GBV is complex and multifaceted, highlighting critical areas of concern that warrant academic inquiry and intervention.³¹ Chagama believes that the implementation of lockdowns and social distancing measures, while essential for controlling viral transmission, has often resulted in victims being confined with their abusers.³² This dynamic has underscored the need for enhanced community support systems and innovative approaches to ensure at-risk individuals can access resources and assistance during crises. It is the responsibility of humanity to ensure that these systems are in place. Peterman et al. argue that economic distress and the repercussions of the pandemic have intensified financial stress within households, potentially exacerbating tensions that can lead to violence.³³ However, Saul believes this challenging context has also observed communities mobilizing to support and alleviate economic hardships, illustrating the potential for resilience and collective action in the face of adversity.³⁴

Abreu alludes that the pandemic has had a profound impact on mental health, with increased incidents of anxiety and depression, which may contribute to heightened aggression in some individuals.³⁵ This situation emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of mental health's role in GBV and the importance of developing holistic support mechanisms for those affected. Furthermore, the limited access to essential services during the pandemic has illuminated systemic vulnerabilities within support infrastructures. The rapid adaptation by organizations to maintain service provision amidst restrictions has revealed the critical importance of flexible, responsive support systems for survivors of GBV. The pandemic has also prompted critical discourse surrounding gender norms and roles, showing the disparities that exist within societies. Importantly, this environment presents a unique and urgent opportunity for advocacy and policy reform aimed at promoting equality and preventing GBV, empowering us to make a difference.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created urgent conditions, significantly increasing the risk of gender-based violence, particularly for women and children. This urgent situation necessitates immediate

²⁸ South African Police Service, *Crime Statistics Report 2020/2021* (Pretoria: SAPS, 2021).

²⁹ Lindsay Botterill, "Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19: How the Pandemic Has Shifted GBV Policies, and Implications for Non-Governmental Organisations and Non-Profits" (University of British Columbia, 2024).

³⁰ Felicia Andersson, "To What Extent Did Social Media and Communication Strategies Help Victims of Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Thailand?" (Malmo University, 2023).

³¹ Lindsay Luhunga Chagama, "The Effects Of Covid-19 Lockdown And Gender-Based Violence Among Women And Girls: A Case Of Kibra Informal Settlement, Langata Constituency, Nairobi City County, Kenya" (The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2023).

³² Chagama, "The Effects Of Covid-19 Lockdown And Gender-Based Violence Among Women And Girls: A Case Of Kibra Informal Settlement, Langata Constituency, Nairobi City County, Kenya."

³³ Amber Peterman et al., *Pandemics and Violence against Women and Children*, vol. 528 (Center for Global Development Washington, DC, 2020).

³⁴ Jack Saul, *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster* (Routledge, 2022).

³⁵ Liliana Abreu et al., "Life with Corona: Increased Gender Differences in Aggression and Depression Symptoms Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic Burden in Germany," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 689396.

action to address the escalating crisis.³⁶ The pandemic resulted in governments enforcing nationwide lockdowns, halting economic activities except for essential services.³⁷ Lockdown measures, financial insecurity, and social isolation have led to increased tensions within households, often resulting in domestic abuse.³⁸ As the COVID-19 pandemic escalated globally, levels of gender-based violence increased, revealing the profound societal impact of the crisis. This societal impact underscores the severity of the situation and the urgent need for comprehensive solutions.³⁹ The pandemic has also exacerbated existing gender inequalities and power dynamics, which are deeply rooted in sociocultural norms and patriarchal structures.⁴⁰ This has contributed to the disproportionate impact of GBV on marginalized communities and vulnerable groups, further undermining their human rights and dignity.

Applying Sustainable Development Principles to Address Gender-Based Violence

The South African government, in a proactive and commendable move, has recognized the urgent need to address the rise in gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹ The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (2020-2030) outlines a comprehensive framework for preventing and responding to GBV, aligning with sustainable development principles.⁴² Crisis and conflicts, pandemics, poverty of social groups, ethnic tensions within states, disintegration of elements of social ties, lack of care for the environment, non-compliance with the rules of social coexistence, weakening of the system of values and moral norms, intensification of social pathology.⁴³ Nkosi and Mbatha have emphasized the critical need for adopting a holistic, rights-based approach to addressing gender-based violence in the post-COVID-19 era. This comprehensive approach includes the provision of comprehensive support services, the transformation of harmful sociocultural norms, and the active participation of communities in designing and implementing interventions.⁴⁴ By aligning these efforts with the sustainable development framework, South Africa can work towards creating a more equitable, inclusive, and violence-free society, thereby demonstrating the potential positive impact of such alignment.

Human Dignity in the Post-Pandemic Era

Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, is the cornerstone of South African democracy, as articulated in s 7(1).⁴⁵ However, exceptional circumstances may arise when the temporary suspension of certain human rights is necessary for the common or greater good. Section 36 of the Constitution allows for limiting rights when such restriction is 'deemed reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society.'⁴⁶ Other rights have internal limitations, such as freedom of speech (s 16).⁴⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic represents a vital example of a time when lives depended on limiting certain liberties, such as the right to move, assemble, work, and attend school and university.⁴⁸ For instance, in

³⁶ Nobuhle Judy Dlamini, "Gender-Based Violence, Twin Pandemic to COVID-19," *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 4-5 (July 30, 2021): 583-90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520975465>.

³⁷ Sithembiso Ndlovu et al., "COVID-19 Impact on Gender-Based Violence among Women in South Africa during Lockdown: A Narrative Review," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 26, no. 7 (2022): 59-71.

³⁸ Ndlovu et al., "COVID-19 Impact on Gender-Based Violence among Women in South Africa during Lockdown: A Narrative Review."

³⁹ Priscilla Gutura and Reema Nunlall, "Gender-Based Violence amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Reflection on the Global Response," *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology & Victimology* 33, no. 3 (2020): 108-25.

⁴⁰ L. Msibi, "The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 in South Africa," *Gender & Development* 28, no. 2 (2020): 315-32.

⁴¹ Mothepane Yaliwe, Petunia Selebogo, and Victor Ojajorotu, "SADC Gender and Development Protocol: An Evaluation of Equality, Empowerment and Gender Based Violence in South Africa (2008-2012)," *Gender and Behaviour* 11, no. 1 (2013): 5175-96.

⁴² Youth, and Persons with Disabilities Department of Women, *National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide 2020-2030* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2020).

⁴³ Jacob Tseko Mofokeng and Kagiso Nicholas Tlou, "Towards Development of Security and Safety Education Support Sustainability Regime to Tackle Gender-Based Violence and Femicide on Campuses," *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* 15, no. 01 (2022): 23-38.

⁴⁴ B. Nkosi and T. Mbatha, "A Rights-Based Approach to Addressing Gender-Based Violence in the Aftermath of COVID-19," *South African Journal of Human Rights* 37, no. 1 (2021): 78-94.

⁴⁵ Section 7 (1) of the Republic of South Africa Constitution, 1996.

⁴⁶ Section 36 of the Constitution.

⁴⁷ Section 16 of the Constitution.

⁴⁸ Narnia Bohler-Muller et al., "The 'Sacrifice' of Human Rights during an Unprecedented Pandemic: Reflections on Survey-Based Evidence," *South African Journal on Human Rights* 37, no. 2 (2021): 154-80.

the case of *De Beers v Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs*,⁴⁹ The Court held that the DMA was the most appropriate legislative measure to deal with the highly infectious and sometimes fatal pandemic – deemed a ‘natural disaster’ by the provisions of s 23(1)(b) of the Act.⁵⁰ Of course, the interpretation and implementation of the provisions of the DMA remained subject to the Constitution in terms of the supremacy clause in section 2, which provides that: ‘this Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic; law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and the obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled.’ Given the nature and impact of the lockdown restrictions imposed by the Executive, a range of constitutionally protected human rights were bound to be affected, leading to several court challenges over the alleged irrationality of government policy (and conduct), De Beers being one such case. This was also emphasized in the case of *Esau and Others v Minister of Co-Operative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Others*.⁵¹ Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the fundamental human rights and dignity of individuals, particularly among marginalized communities.⁵² As the world navigates the aftermath of the crisis, it is crucial to explore how the principles of sustainable development can be leveraged to uphold human dignity in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).⁵³ The Pandemic threat made the social body sick, even before the COVID-19 virus attacked the individual’s health.⁵⁴

The Concept of Human Dignity in the South African Context

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting and promoting human dignity has become even more crucial, as the crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.⁵⁵ The pandemic's impact has not only highlighted the fissures in society but has also amplified the voices of those who have long been marginalized. In this context, the urgent need for a robust framework that champions human dignity and addresses systemic disparities is paramount. Albertyn states that human dignity encompasses the inherent worth and respect that should be accorded to all individuals, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural status. This urgency calls for immediate action to prevent further exacerbation of inequalities.⁵⁶

Applying sustainable development principles, as outlined in the National Development Plan 2030 provides a comprehensive roadmap to navigate these challenges.⁵⁷ The NDP emphasizes the importance of creating a more inclusive and equitable society by addressing the multifaceted roots of poverty, inequality, and unemployment while promoting dignity by realizing fundamental human rights. By integrating these sustainable development principles into policy and practice, South Africa can work towards a future where the inherent dignity of all its citizens is upheld and celebrated.

Sustainable development entails a holistic approach considering economic, social, and environmental dimensions to foster community resilience. This means prioritizing not only economic recovery but also the enhancement of social and cultural rights. For instance, ensuring access to quality education and health care are fundamental to human dignity. The pandemic underscored how vital these services are, especially for marginalized groups who often face barriers to access. By reinforcing commitments to universal health coverage and quality education, the government can empower individuals to lead dignified lives.

Furthermore, the NDP 2030 articulates the importance of participatory governance, where citizens are actively engaged in decision-making. This inclusive approach, where all voices are heard, is paramount. It fosters a sense of belonging and respect for diverse voices. This participatory approach

⁴⁹ *De Beer N.O and Others v Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (21542/2020) [2021] ZAGPPHC 67.*

⁵⁰ Section 23(1)(b) of Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002.

⁵¹ *Esau and Others v Minister of Co-Operative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Others (611/2020) [2021] ZASCA 9; [2021] 2 All SA 357 (SCA); 2021 (3) SA 593 (SCA).*

⁵² Nebojsa Nakicenovic et al., “Innovations for Sustainability: Pathways to an Efficient and Post-Pandemic Future,” 2020.

⁵³ Augustine Edozor Arimoro, Ezinne Mirian Igbokwe, and Tamaroudoubra Tom Egbe, *Law and Sustainable Development After COVID-19* (Routledge, 2024).

⁵⁴ Laurențiu Tănase, “The Dignity of Human Nature, the Tensions of the Pandemic and the Post-Pandemic Challenges,” *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 9, no. 3 (2021): 568–83.

⁵⁵ Fatima Khan, “Does the Right to Dignity Extend Equally to Refugees in South Africa?,” *African Human Rights Law Journal* 22, no. 2 (January 27, 2023): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2020/v20n1a10>.

⁵⁶ C. Albertyn, “The Right to Human Dignity in South African Jurisprudence,” *Constitutional Court Review* 10, no. 1 (2020): 207–30.

⁵⁷ Commission, “National Development Plan 2030: Our Future-Make It Work.”

enhances human dignity by recognizing the agency of individuals and communities, which is essential in rebuilding trust and solidarity in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

Additionally, addressing GBV and other forms of discrimination is critical to the realization of human dignity for all. The pandemic saw a sharp increase in GBV cases, revealing the urgent and compelling need for protective and empowering measures for vulnerable populations, especially women and children. Integrating gender-responsive policies into the sustainable development framework will protect human rights and promote equality and justice, allowing all citizens to thrive.

Applying sustainable development principles from the NDP 2030 can serve as a practical framework to confront the challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Young asserts that by prioritizing human dignity in recovery efforts, South Africa can foster a more just and equitable society, laying the groundwork for a future where all citizens can enjoy their rights and freedoms without barriers.⁵⁸ Young argues that implementing these principles will not only uphold the inherent dignity of individuals but will also contribute to a stronger, more resilient nation capable of facing future crises with compassion and integrity. These changes offer a hopeful vision for the future, where the rights and dignity of all citizens are upheld.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and its Impact on Human Dignity

By global trends, South Africa is striving for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).⁵⁹ The 4IR, characterized by rapid advancements in technology, automation, and artificial intelligence, has the potential to both enhance and threaten the human dignity of individuals in the post-COVID-19 era.⁶⁰ On the one hand, 4IR technologies can improve access to essential services, increase efficiency, and create new economic opportunities.⁶¹ Technology is quickly taking over the place of human beings in society.⁶² Integrating sustainable development principles, such as promoting inclusive and ethical technological development, can help mitigate the negative impact of 4IR on human dignity.⁶³ This approach requires the active participation of diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organizations, and technology companies,⁶⁴ to ensure that the benefits of technological advancements are equitably distributed and that the fundamental rights of all individuals are protected.⁶⁵ This includes actively bridging the digital divide and ensuring that marginalized and underserved communities have equal access to the opportunities technology provides. Furthermore, this commitment extends to safeguarding the fundamental rights of all individuals, recognizing that every person deserves protection and respect, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, or background.⁶⁶ In this way, societies can create an environment where technology is a tool for empowerment and upliftment rather than exacerbating existing inequalities or infringing upon rights. It is essential to stress the power of collective action, as it is through unity and collaboration, that societies can build a future where technological progress benefits everyone, reinforcing the values of justice, dignity, and equality for all.

In the post-pandemic era, upholding human dignity by prioritizing sustainable development practices that foster equity and well-being for all is essential. The South African government has recognized the importance of addressing the intersection of sustainable development, human dignity, and

⁵⁸ Katharine G. Young, "The Idea of a Human Rights-Based Economic Recovery after COVID-19," *International Journal of Public Law and Policy* 6, no. 4 (2020): 390–415.

⁵⁹ Rudolf M. Oosthuizen and Claude-Hélène Mayer, "At the Edge of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Employees' Perceptions of Employment Equity from a CIBART Perspective," *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 45, no. 1 (2019): 1–11.

⁶⁰ Katerina Zdravkova, "Reconsidering Human Dignity in the New Era," *New Ideas in Psychology* 54 (2019): 112–17.

⁶¹ Kizito Alakwe, "Human Dignity in the Era of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Issues and Prospects," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 5, no. 6 (2023): 87–97.

⁶² Chinaza Uleanya, "Ubuntu in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the African Society," *African Renaissance* 17, no. 3 (September 15, 2020): 33–45, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-5305/2020/17n3a2>.

⁶³ Mthethwa, "Sustainable Development and the Protection of Human Dignity in the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

⁶⁴ David Mhlanga and Tankiso Moloi, "The Stakeholder Theory in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," *International Journal of Economics and Finance Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 352–68.

⁶⁵ Tankiso Steven Moloi and Mary Kehinde Salawu, "Institutionalizing Technologies in South African Universities towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)* 17, no. 03 (February 18, 2022): 204–27, <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v17i03.25631>.

⁶⁶ As protected by sections 9 and 10 of the Constitution.

the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the post-COVID-19 era.⁶⁷ The Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution has emphasized the need to develop a comprehensive strategy that aligns 4IR advancements with the principles of sustainable development, including protecting human rights and promoting social and economic inclusion.⁶⁸ The World Health Organization officially classified COVID-19 as a pandemic in early March 2020.⁶⁹ According to the 2021 Sustainable Development Goals Report, COVID-19 has caused significant disruption to people's lives and livelihoods. The report referred to it as:

"a crisis of monumental proportions, with catastrophic effects on people's lives and livelihoods and on efforts to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development."⁷⁰

The Intersection of Cultural Norms and Sustainable Development Principles in Post-COVID-19 Recovery Efforts

In the aftermath of the pandemic, there is a need to foster the principles of sustainable development goals to recover from its effects. Educational institutions are strategic tools for disseminating SDG knowledge since education is an effective developmental tool.⁷¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has immensely impacted the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainability in human lives.⁷² Global crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 can compromise the world's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁷³ The successful implementation of sustainable development principles post-COVID-19 era is heavily influenced by sociocultural factors shaping South African citizens' lived experiences and perspectives.⁷⁴ In addition, the world has committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 SDGs adopted by UN Member States in September 2015.⁷⁵

The aftermath of the pandemic has unveiled the interconnectedness of sustainability, cultural values, and human rights more starkly than ever before. As societies strive to recover, adopting a holistic approach that addresses the economic and social challenges and respects and incorporates diverse cultural norms is essential.⁷⁶ Integrating sustainable development principles is crucial for fostering resilience. Communities that prioritize sustainability are better equipped to handle future crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had profound consequences on social, economic, and cultural life at the global level. For instance, local food production can fortify food security, reducing dependency on global supply chains that are vulnerable to disruption. Such measures address economic challenges and align with cultural values around local traditions and practices.

Furthermore, recovery efforts must center on human rights, ensuring that all individuals, especially marginalized groups, have a voice in shaping their future. Inclusive policies that recognize and elevate local traditions are not merely about cultural preservation; they are vital for fostering community solidarity and promoting a sense of belonging. When local cultures are respected and integrated into recovery initiatives, communities are more likely to engage in and support them, enhancing their effectiveness. Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities, and a failure to address these through a lens of equity would be detrimental. By focusing on the rights of all individuals—particularly those who have been historically marginalized—societies can create a more just and equitable framework

⁶⁷ John Cantius Mubangizi, "A Human Rights-Based Approach to Sustainable Development in Africa Post-Covid-19," *Obiter* 45, no. 1 (2024): 180–96.

⁶⁸ The Presidency, *Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Final Report* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2019).

⁶⁹ Gabriela Soldano Garcez and Renata Soares Bonavides, "THE WORLD IN THE POST-PANDEMIC," n.d.

⁷⁰ United Nations, "United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021," 2022, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/>.

⁷¹ Michael Takudzwa Pasara and David Mhlanga, "Accelerating Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19: The Role of Higher Education Institutions in South Africa," *Emerald Open Research* 1, no. 3 (2023).

⁷² Meisam Ranjbari et al., "Three Pillars of Sustainability in the Wake of COVID-19: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda for Sustainable Development," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 297 (2021): 126660.

⁷³ Kalterina Shulla et al., "Effects of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," *Discover Sustainability* 2 (2021): 1–19.

⁷⁴ Denys Svyrydenko, Nataliia Krokmal, and Lesya Chervona, "Social Responsibility as a Basis for Implementing the Goals of Sustainable Development in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Philosophy and Cosmology* 30 (2023): 77–87.

⁷⁵ United Nations-UN, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1," 2015, https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.

⁷⁶ Bianca Blum and Bernhard K. J. Neumärker, "Lessons from Globalization and the COVID-19 Pandemic for Economic, Environmental and Social Policy," *World* 2, no. 2 (June 11, 2021): 308–33, <https://doi.org/10.3390/world2020020>.

for recovery. This involves acknowledging human rights and ensuring they are upheld in policy-making processes.

Eventually, a holistic approach that intertwines sustainability, cultural values, and human rights is imperative for navigating the post-pandemic landscape. By advocating for inclusive policies honoring local traditions while promoting resilience and equity, societies can ensure a more sustainable and just future for everyone. This approach addresses immediate recovery needs and lays the groundwork for long-term well-being and stability. South African society is characterized by a rich diversity of cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices that can significantly impact the implementation of sustainable development principles.⁷⁷ Cross-country differences in pro-environmental attitudes and corporate social performance are recognized. However, scarce evidence exists on how cultural values influence our pro-environmental behavior.⁷⁸ It is shown that the fluid nature and meaning of "culture" may require a distinction between the role of "culture" per se and the role of "cultural governance" in the sustainable development context.⁷⁹

Discussion Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered various aspects of human life, underscoring the pressing need for sustainable development principles to create resilient societies and protect fundamental human rights. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly among marginalized communities, thus highlighting the urgent requirement for effective and sustainable solutions. By applying sustainable development principles as articulated in international frameworks and the South African Constitution, South Africa can establish a solid foundation for addressing the challenges that have arisen in the aftermath of the pandemic. These principles are essential for stakeholders to prioritize human rights and promote equitable recovery strategies, fostering renewed hope and optimism for the future. The observation by Nkuna that the pandemic has intensified social vulnerabilities reinforces the critical importance of these frameworks in tackling complex challenges. The significant increase in ICT usage during the pandemic has been transformative, offering substantial opportunities for advancing human rights and presenting challenges related to privacy and equitable access. The South African Government's Digital Economy Masterplan 2023 exemplifies the potential of ICT to improve the quality of life for citizens while addressing entrenched social disparities, underscoring the importance of inclusive policymaking. Furthermore, the alarming increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic highlights critical vulnerabilities that require urgent attention. The lockdown measures implemented have heightened risks for women and children, thereby reinforcing the necessity of applying sustainable development principles to confront this pervasive issue. The comprehensive frameworks established by the South African government to combat gender-based violence demonstrate a solid commitment to fostering a more equitable society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, stakeholders need to adopt sustainable development principles in recovery efforts. The following recommendations are proposed:

- Align Recovery Plans to ensure all recovery strategies are aligned with sustainable development goals and respect human rights, focusing on equity. Enhance ICT infrastructure to provide marginalized communities equitable access to digital resources, facilitating economic and educational opportunities.
- Address Gender-Based Violence by implementing targeted programs to combat the rise in gender-based violence, enhancing support services, and enforcing protective laws. Engage Communities

⁷⁷ Jasmine Tata and Sameer Prasad, "National Cultural Values, Sustainability Beliefs, and Organizational Initiatives," *Cross Cultural Management* 22, no. 2 (2015): 278–96.

⁷⁸ Agnieszka Chwialkowska, Waheed Akbar Bhatti, and Mario Glowik, "The Influence of Cultural Values on Pro-Environmental Behavior," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 268 (2020): 122305.

⁷⁹ Du Plessis, A.A. and Rautenbach, C., 2010. Legal perspectives on the role of culture in sustainable development. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad*, 13(1), pp.27-71.

to include diverse stakeholders in policymaking to reflect the needs of all segments of society, particularly the most affected.

- Develop monitoring systems to evaluate the effectiveness of recovery strategies and allow for timely adjustments. Invest in Mental Health to support individuals impacted by the pandemic, especially those facing trauma.
- Promote Community Resilience by launching skills development and empowerment programs for vulnerable populations to build long-term sustainability.

Following these recommendations, South Africa can foster a more equitable and resilient society, ensuring a sustainable future by prioritizing human rights and social justice.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly illuminated society's deeply ingrained injustices and historical inequalities, particularly in South Africa. The alarming increases in poverty, crime, and Gender-Based Violence have culminated in a humanitarian crisis that disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable populations, highlighting the urgent need for decisive action. Integrating ICT presents a promising solution for fostering economic opportunities and enhancing community resilience. Societies can promote social justice and safeguard human dignity by aligning their recovery efforts with sustainable development principles established in international frameworks and the South African Constitution. As they look to the future, stakeholders must harness technology and economic growth to cultivate a more equitable society. The challenges the pandemic brings should motivate societies to transform adversity into opportunity, ultimately paving the way for a future where all individuals can thrive in a just and inclusive environment.

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